THE SEMANTICS OF THE SIMPLE TENSES AND FULL-VERB INVERSION IN ENGLISH: A STORY OF SHARED EPISTEMIC SCHEMAS

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I. Introduction: The English simple tenses in ongoing event reports

- Well-known restriction on simple tenses in English: they cannot be used for concurrent event reports:

(1) Be quiet, I *try / am trying to read.

(2) She *had / was having a bath when he called, so she couldn’t come to the phone.
I. INTRODUCTION: THE ENGLISH SIMPLE TENSES IN ONGOING EVENT REPORTS

- But there are exceptions!

  - Performatives:

    (3) *I promise* it won’t happen again.

  - Sports broadcasting:

    (4) *De Bruyne passes* to Mertens, Mertens to Lukaku… *Lukaku shoots!*

  - Demonstrations:

    (5) *Look, I first place* the card underneath the table cloth, and then *wait* for ten seconds.
I. INTRODUCTION: THE ENGLISH SIMPLE TENSES IN ONGOING EVENT REPORTS

And also:

- Full-verb inversion: adverbial in sentence-initial position and (non-pronominal) subject in postverbal position

(6) *On the shelf* *lies* a book → locative inversion
(7) *Along came* Debbie Downer → directional inversion
(8) *There / here comes* my bus → presentational *there*
I. INTRODUCTION: THE ENGLISH SIMPLE TENSES IN ONGOING EVENT REPORTS

- No progressive aspect with full-verb inversion?

(6’) ??On the shelf is lying a book
(7’) *Along was coming Debbie Downer
(8’) *There / here is coming my bus
I. INTRODUCTION: THE ENGLISH SIMPLE TENSES IN ONGOING EVENT REPORTS

Corpus data:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corpus</th>
<th>Full-verb inversion token frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collins corpora of modern written and spoken text</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown Corpus of Standard American English</td>
<td>314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OntoNotes Corpus</td>
<td>678</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty Birner corpus</td>
<td>1778</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos Prado-Alonso corpus</td>
<td>649</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>3609</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I. Introduction: The English simple tenses in ongoing event reports

- Only four progressive tokens:

(9) Out of the mouths of revolutionaries are coming words of moderation.

(10) From the west were rolling pile after pile of fat, white, complicated clouds, and above the clouds was the clear and uncomplicated blue.

(11) They have a great big tank in the kitchen, and in the tank are sitting all of these pots.

(12) I’m sure you know that the Queen is standing beside the Duke of Edinburgh. In the middle and on her right is standing the Lord Mayor of London.
2. Coercion?

- Coercion:

  If there is a semantic conflict (i.e. a mismatch) between a construction and an element embedded in that construction, the construction will overrule and the embedded element will take on the meaning of the structure in which it is embedded.
2. Coercion?

Cxн: Full-verb inversion for ongoing event reports

Form: [Preposed element – verb\textsubscript{S} – non-pronominal subject]
2. Coercion?

Cxₜ: Full-verb inversion for ongoing event reports

Form: [Preposed element – verbₛ – non-pronominal subject]

Semantics simple tense: no ongoing events
2. COERCION?

Cxnl: Full-verb inversion for ongoing event reports

Form: [Preposed element – verb\textsubscript{S} – non-pronominal subject]

Semantics simple tense: no ongoing events

MISMATCH?
Mismatch?

Yes and no…

- Yes: aspectual mismatch and thus coercion → simple present takes on the aspectual meaning of the full-verb inversion
- No: cxn and verb are still in accordance at the **epistemic** level → cxn indicates full and instant identifiability of the designated process and thus selects the tenses that indicate full and instant identifiability = the simple tenses

→ Coercion only takes place at the aspectual level and is motivated by epistemic compatibility
3. This talk

- Two goals:
  
  i. Evidence for epistemic compatibility of full-verb inversion and the simple tenses
  
  ii. Discuss implications of analysis for coercion in CxG
4. The epistemic import of the English simple tenses

- English simple tenses systematically used in contexts that involve fully and instantly identifiable situations

  • In the present: habits, states, performatives, demonstrations, instructions, live sports broadcasts

  → In each context, the conceptualizer has a full view of the situation at hand at the time of speaking (cf. De Wit 2017)

  • In the past: global readings

    ○ Cf. *She took a shower, brushed her teeth and fed the cat.* → sequential reading
4. THE EPISTEMIC IMPORT OF THE ENGLISH SIMPLE TENSES

- English simple tenses systematically used in contexts that involve fully and instantly identifiable situations

  … Also in the context of full-verb inversion
5. The function of full-verb inversion in English

- Two important features

1) Full-verb inversion can trigger a ‘deictic effect’ (Drubig 1988)

(13)  a. *Fred opened the bedroom door and the cat walked in.*

   b. *Fred opened the bedroom door and in walked the cat.*

→ conceptualizer’s vantage point anchored within the location designated by the preposed constituent (the deictic center)
5. THE FUNCTION OF FULL-VERB INVERSION IN ENGLISH

- Two important features
  
  1) Full-verb inversion can trigger a ‘deictic effect’ (Drubig 1988)

  - Deictic effect arises with presentational *there* by definition

  - Deictic effect arises with some cases of directional inversion with a specified source or endpoint, but not with locative inversion, e.g.:

    (14) *One night there was a tap on the window. Mrs. Rabbit peeped through the window. Outside stood a little angel.* (Birner, 1638)
5. The function of full-verb inversion in English

- Two important features

2) The verb in full-verb inversion is ‘informationally light’ (Birner 1995)

(15) a. In that bedroom slept two people.
    b. ?? In that bedroom jumped two people.

→ The verb expresses a canonical relationship between the entities designated by the preposed and the postposed constituents.
6. Epistemic congruence of English simple tenses and full-verb inversion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English simple tenses</th>
<th>Full-verb inversion in English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full and instant identifiability</td>
<td>Deictic effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Canonical relationship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Central claims:

1) In most cases of full-verb inversion, the designated events are fully and instantly identifiable by virtue of canonicity and progressive aspect is not needed.

2) In those cases in which there is a deictic effect, progressive aspect is prohibited.
6. **Epistemic Congruence of English Simple Tenses and Full-Verb Inversion**

1) In most cases of full-verb inversion, the designated events are fully and instantly identifiable by virtue of canonicity and progressive aspect is not needed.

E.g. *Into the room walked a cat.*

Process is highly predictable, and thus instantly fully identifiable from the conceptualizer’s vantage point → simple-past construal.
6. Epistemic Congruence of English Simple Tenses and Full-Verb Inversion

1) In most cases of full-verb inversion, the designated events are fully and instantly identifiable and progressive aspect is not needed

- Conceptualizer conceives of presence, absence or (dis)appearance of a figure (from) within her deictic center
- Process that led to this presence, absence or (dis)appearance is conceived of as fully identifiable and complete at the time when we report it

→ Frequent use of full-verb inversion to express a sense of inevitability:

(16) There **goes** the neighborhood.
(17) Then boom! Along **comes** the Internet. (Collins)
(18) Up we **go**!
6. **Epistemic Congruence of English Simple Tenses and Full-Verb Inversion**

1) In most cases of full-verb inversion, the designated events are fully and instantly identifiable and progressive aspect is not needed.

... but in some cases we do want to give more emphasis to the process and use progressive aspect:

- When the denoted event is stretched out, as in:

  (10) *From the west were rolling pile after pile of fat, white, complicated clouds, and above the clouds was the clear and uncomplicated blue.*

  ... and other examples of directional inversion along an unbounded trajectory.
6. Epistemic congruence of English simple tenses and full-verb inversion

Zooming in on the ongoing process:

From the west were rolling pile after pile of fat, white, complicated clouds…
6. Epistemic congruence of English simple tenses and full-verb inversion

2) In those cases in which there is a deictic effect, progressive aspect is prohibited

e.g. Into the room walked a cat
6. **Epistemic Congruence of English Simple Tenses and Full-Verb Inversion**

2) In those cases in which there is a deictic effect, progressive aspect is prohibited

*Into the room was walking a cat*
6. **Epistemic Congruence of English Simple Tenses and Full-Verb Inversion**

2) In those cases in which there is a deictic effect, progressive aspect is prohibited

→ Conceptualizer cannot step out of deictic center, since her vantage point is anchored within this center
6. **Epistemic Congruence of English Simple Tenses and Full-Verb Inversion**

2) In those cases in which there is a deictic effect, progressive aspect is prohibited

→ Conceptualizer cannot step out of deictic center, since her vantage point is anchored within this center

→ Analysis supported by evidence from native speaker elicitation: progressive aspect deemed possible with locative inversion, less so with directional inversion (depending on whether or not the deictic effect arose) and not at all with presentational inversion
6. Epistemic congruence of English simple tenses and full-verb inversion

i. Epistemic compatibility full-verb inversion and the simple tenses

- Full-verb inversion involves **canonical** processes that can be viewed in their entirety at reference time \(\rightarrow\) **full and instant identifiability** (associated with frequent interpretations of inevitability) characteristic of the English simple tenses

- Whenever the **deictic effect** arises, the use of the simple tenses is even obligatory
7. IMPLICATIONS OF ANALYSIS FOR COERCION IN CxG

ii. Implications for analysis of coercion

- At first sight: incompatibility between semantics of construction and semantics of embedded tense
  → Construction overrules: it lifts restrictions on simple tenses, so that they can be used for ongoing event reports
  → Change of aspectual range of embedded element = coercion

- But: at the epistemic level there is compatibility between construction and verb: construction involves fully and instantly identifiable events, just like the simple tenses in English

- Implications for the analysis of coercion in CxG: coercion does not happen randomly; cxn can change the semantics of an embedded element, but only selects this element because it is in some way semantically compatible with it in the first place.
REFERENCES


Want to know more about aspect and inversion?

3. The aspectual semantics of the English simple tenses

- The English simple present as a perfective construction with different types of situation:
  
  - **English simple present + present-time states:**
    States are contractible (i.e. they have the subinterval property) → can be identified on the basis of the sample that overlaps with the time of speaking

  - **English simple present + present-time events:**
    Performative contexts, sports broadcasts, demonstrations etc.: typically short events that the speaker can identify in their entirety at the time of speaking because of their predictability

→ Same analysis in terms of perfectivity for the English simple present in full-verb inversion
4. The aspectual facts: Corpus data and native-speaker elicitations

- Conclusions drawn from corpus research:

1) The simple tenses are used in an overwhelming majority of full-verb inversion instances

2) Progressive aspect is exceedingly rare, but not excluded → too few tokens to make any generalizations as to when it can be used

Native-speaker elicitations
4. The aspectual facts: Corpus data and native-speaker elicitations

- Native-speaker elicitations
  - Goal: evaluate the relative acceptability of progressive aspect in contexts featuring full-verb inversion
  - Two acceptability judgement tests (in total 68 participants, 70 simple versus progressive sentences), four-point scale

Examples:
(15) Across the desert drift clouds of red dust.
    and
(16) Across the desert are drifting clouds of red dust.

(17) He claps his hands and away they go.
    and
(18) He claps his hands and away they are going.
4. The aspectual facts: Corpus data and native-speaker elicitations

- Significant differences between simple and progressive examples found for:

- Presentational inversion and directional inversion with specified source or endpoint

(19) There *goes/* *is going* my bus (p = 4.251\(^{-40}\))
(20) I open the door and in *comes/* *is coming* the cat (p = 1.132\(^{-9}\))
(21) Out of the room *steps/* *is stepping* a huge man (p = 0.0001)
4. The aspectual facts: Corpus data and native-speaker elicitations

- Simple present and present progressive considered equally acceptable in:

- **Locative inversion:**
  (22) *In that house live / are living strange people.* (p = 0.501)
  (23) *On top of the square block lies / is lying another block.* (p = 0.376)
  (24) *Upstairs hang / are hanging my mother’s clothes.* (p = 0.129)

- **Directional inversion across some trajectory:**
  (25) *Across that bridge go / are going hundreds of cars.* (p = 0.020)
  (26) *Along the riverside path walk / are walking several tourists.* (p = 0.389)
  (27) *Down the beach run / are running cute puppies.* (p = 0.443)

- **Directional inversion with a specified source or endpoint:**
  (28) *Up to the hilltop they run / are running.* (p = 0.645)
  (29) *From our neighbor’s house comes / is coming the sound of piano music.* (p = 0.100)
4. The aspectual facts: Corpus data and native-speaker elicitations

- Conclusions on the basis of native-speaker elicitations:
  
  - Locative inversion and directional inversion along some trajectory are more favorable to progressive aspect
  
  - Directional inversion with a specified source or endpoint is more versatile
  
  - Presentational inversion does not allow progressive aspect

→ An analysis of aspect in full-verb inversion needs to be able to account for these differences